

## Campaign Against Poisoning

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The industrial revolution of the 19th century gives new meaning to what 'poisons' are. As the growth and expansion of the chemical industry reached its heights, the incidences of poisoning markedly increased, particularly at the early stages of its development.

Currently, there are some 80,000 chemicals in use according to the International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals based in Geneva; and as many as three new chemicals entering the market daily. Not only are the industrial workers more exposed to toxic substances, other members of the public are also implicated as more and more of these substances find their way into the society at large.

There are now substances ranging from pesticides to detergents, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics, a whole range food additives, preservatives, anti-oxidants and so on. Today there is no household, agricultural plantation and industrial firm that does not use any chemical substance, so much so it is difficult to imagine how modern living would proceed without them. There was even at one time a perfume named 'Poison' - an epitome perhaps of how close these chemicals are in 'brightening up' of daily lives.

Along with this new development unfortunately are also a range of useless but equally potent substances. Ironically, the more developed and industrialized a country gets, the more of such substances are being produced.

According to the United Nation Environment Programme (UNEP), of the 400 million tons of wastes produced annually, more than 90 per cent are being 'manufactured' in the OECD countries. These are the metabolites, intermediates, effluents, sludges, byproducts of the chemical processes involved in the manufacturing of all sorts of "consumer goods". They present a new set of problem of storage as their amount and volume accumulate over the years. Disposing them safely is by no means cheap either. As a result many of them become part and parcel of today's living, sometimes not at all desirable.

For example, there is always the question of 'dumping' and contamination; and with it comes the overwhelming problem of pollution. Developing countries in most instances find great difficulty in coping up with them.

Hence, not only the proliferation of these substances are destroying the environment, they are also endangering the human species itself. With the rampant use many toxic elements, the risk of accidental poisonings especially at workplaces seem to increase as well. Disasters caused by industrial negligence or sheer deceit involving the use of noxious chemicals is one of the major concern worldwide.

These can occur anywhere be it the developed or developing countries. Barely a decade ago, many could still recall the tragedies involving the Union Carbide disaster at Bhopal, India, followed by the world's worst nuclear accident at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Russia in 1986. And more recently experts are already warning of a second catastrophic explosion, any time at Chernobyl. These are just two of the numerous examples.

**Table 1. Major diastase involving chemicals, including drugs**

Year	Chemicals(use)	Place	Tragedies
1950	Organic mercurials (seed dressing)	Japan  Iraq	Villagers poisoned by fish contaminated with mercury from factory waste at Minamata Bay  Farmers and families ate flour made of dressed seed meant for planting
1953	Clioquinol (amoebicide)	Japan	Thousands suffered from SMON (subacute myeloptic neuritis) and blindness

1956	Thalidomide (sedative and antiemetic)	Europe	Thousands of cases of born with limb deformities - flipper babies
1970	Practolol (heart drug)	UK	Eye damage for thousands of patients
1976	Dioxin (herbicide)	Italy	Chemical released by accident over Seveso (pop. 17,000)
1979	Radioactive water	USA	Nuclear plant at Three Mile Island contaminated Sasquehanna River
1981	Rape seed oil with unknown toxin	Spain	Cooking oil adulterated causing 270 dead and 17000 affected

In fact, over the last 40 years incidences involving hazardous chemicals (including therapeutic poisonings) worldwide, as indicated by the above table, underscore the cause for concern.

To top it all is the use of poisons in many criminal acts, like the sarin attack in Tokyo last March. The use chemicals in crimes and, worst still, among warring factions have always been one of the many that result in the senseless killing of innocent lives. The so-called Gulf War Syndrome until today remains an illusive problems allegedly caused by chemical warfare.

At the same time the risks of suicides tend to be more prevalent, what with lethal substances readily available to almost anyone including those in distress. Sometime the forces of modern day society drives some people to a state of chemical dependency - alcohol, drugs, tobacco a majority of which can be psychotoxic in nature. In all these toxic exposures, children seem to be the most disadvantaged group.

In modern society thus, the fact that poisons were first used for killing, has taken a different twist. We are indeed paying for some of the apparent conveniences that we have so aptly created for ourselves. Such 'tradeoffs' seem inevitable, if unjustified, that they are here to stay unless something drastic is done. It is because of this that there is now an urgent need for a concerted effort against poisoning. There is a need to dwell on poison education and prevention, as well as public vigilance on the use of poisons as part of a continuous campaign to stop the unnecessary exposure to hazardous and dangerous substances.

There are now a number of initiatives taken in this direction; and the establishment of a National Poison Centre is one which is widely recognized. It is the intention of the National Poison Centre with the assistance of other relevant agencies, at home and abroad, as well as the media to initiate and sustain this campaign.

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